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ABSTRACT

Faculty at Wichita State University have developed a research assignment that involves freshman composition students in researching the events that occurred on the day they were born. This paper presents the research outline--an overview of the tasks involved in writing the research papers--that was developed for the assignment. It then discusses the types of sources students may consult; ways students can develop a theme and a structure for their papers; approaches to selecting, combining, and presenting the material to emphasize the theme; and possible variations in format. Illustrative examples from students' writings are provided throughout the paper. (GW)

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FRESHMAN HISTORIES : A BASIC RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

No sane freshman wants to write a research paper. The things are compiled during end-of-semester crunch, and furthermore, students tend to feel that their papers aren't real research. Lawyers, literary critics, newspaper reporters have a duty to their subjects, if not always a passion for them; but most freshmen, at least, have yet to develop that sense of purpose. Ultimately, they slip out from under the task, stringing together short ideas and long quotes, and then adding some footnotes for the "research" part of it. Clearly, this product and the high-pressure, low-yield situations that produce it are not "what the teacher wants." Still, we don't want to abandon the research assignment. We want to improve it -- find ways to get students digging, not just shovelling; writing, not merely typing. With this goal in mind, some of us at Wichita State University developed an assignment we called "Researching the Day You Were Born."[1] The results were favorable, in that the students said the papers weren't too long or hard to write, and they obviously enjoyed showing off the specimens they dug up from those quaint old times, the 1950's. From our point of view, the assignment was worthwhile because it gave the students a short, circumscribed but intensive exercise in research methods. Also, having defined in advance the length of the papers and the approach we wanted the students to use, we found it easier at every stage of the writing to make concrete suggestions, and to explain why such changes were necessary.

In planning this assignment, we had assumed that a short, focussed paper would be a handier teaching tool than a longer writing project,

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and we suspected that students would remember just enough about their personal origins that they might want to know more. We also needed a controlled assignment that would encourage careful use of a limited number of sources, partly because the assignment had to double as a short, practical library research unit to back up our library orientation program. Finally, we were thinking about the paper as an essay assignment: an exercise that would require the students to synthesize various kinds of material and relate it to a central idea -- in this case, the significance of the day when the student was born.

The result of our planning was a description of a three-page paper that would characterize the time when the student first came into the world. Students were expected to demonstrate the significance of the major events that took place that day, or if necessary, during the week between the preceding Monday and the following Sunday. In addition, they were to suggest the atmosphere and the color of that period by bringing in references to the customs, the fashions, the advertising, the economy, and the acts and opinions of famous people. In essence, we asked the student to write a miniature history of the day of his birth; as a historian, he or she would try to show the reader what the world was like then, and why that day might be worth our attention as a small yet significant part of our history.

Before we introduced the assignment to our classes, we worked out a research outline, an overview of the tasks involved in writing the paper: It went something like this: 1) The first step is to collect the data, and this involves consulting newspapers, magazines and other records of the time, and recording details that seem important, or perhaps just interesting. 2) As the student proceeds with his note taking, he should be trying to discover the main theme

of the paper. Deciding on a theme is the most difficult step for most people, but it is crucial, because the impact of these short papers depends upon the rapid emergence of some kind of pattern in the events described. 3) Once the main theme has been chosen, the writer needs to start thinking of an overall structure for the paper which will help to emphasize that theme. 4) Then he can begin to select and put into order those details that will form the body of the paper. This selection is partly determined by the theme, naturally, but the student is also concerned with the continuity, coherence, and significance of his historical sketch as he forges it into a narrative. 5) Last, there are the mechanics of the notes and bibliography, and the questions of format, including the possibility of graphics to accompany the text. This research outline is nothing new, of course, but we found that it helped the students to use a standard procedure as a frame for the following techniques, which are especially useful in writing these brief histories:

Sources. Typically, the student's first question about this paper concerns the number of sources he has to look up. This is an impertinent question, in a sense, but it's aimed in the right direction. The sources are the life of these papers, and the sooner they are discussed, the better for the students. We discovered that most people have enough material for a good essay if they consult a total of seven sources from these two categories:

Four Basic Sources from:

New York Times; London Times; Local Newspaper, if any; Time; Newsweek; US News and World Report; Life; Look; Saturday Evening Post; World Almanac; etc.

Three Others from:

Harper's; Saturday Review; Argosy; True; Vogue; Redbook; Ladies Home Journal; Popular Mechanics; Foreign Affairs; etc.

In the newspapers and news magazines, students will find convenient summaries of the main events of the time, while the popular magazines contain the peripheral detail necessary for showing what life was like some twenty years ago. We were fortunate in that our college library holds microfilms of the back issues of the New York Times, the London Times and our local Wichita paper, so that each student had access to an abundance of news coverage, no matter what his birthdate was. In practice, we found that most students drew their primary material from one newspaper and a couple of magazines, relying on the other sources for the odd fact or illustration.

Theme and Structure. Before we actually sent our classes off to the stacks, we gave them general instructions on how to discover a theme or guiding idea which would keep them from being swamped by their reading. One way to provide the paper with such a theme is to focus on a few main events that occurred on or near the date in question, and let those events characterize the period. Then a certain amount of amplifying detail -- customs, fashions, gossip and so forth -- can be brought in by analogy, or perhaps by contrast, to suggest the atmosphere of the times. The following example shows how one student focussed his paper on the events of one week during Eisenhower's administration. The lead paragraph announces the events, and its concluding paragraph provides a sense of closure by summarizing the same events in retrospect:

> The week was that of January 19, 1957. Newly re-elected President Dwight Eisenhower was proposing a 72 billion dollar budget for the year 1957-1958. He was also touring the Great Plains states that had been stricken by drought. On the international scene, the United States government was making the

crucial decision of whether or not to send aid to the Middle East. And, on that date, in Plainsville, Kansas, I was born.

. . . . . .

Though I may have been the main attraction for my family that week, the world's eyes were on U.S. President Eisenhower as he began his new term in office. There were important decisions to be made concerning U.S. affairs both at home and abroad. The determination of the new budget aid for drought-stricken states, and aid to the Middle East rested with President Eisenhower and those under him.

Another way to structure this research paper is to choose a theme or dominant impression suggested by the events of that week, and then show how the other material is related to it. Such a theme might be the writer's feeling that when he was born, our nation, or even the world was going through some very hard times. Here is the lead paragraph from a paper organized in this way:

I was born amidst turmoil. Not only the turmoil of labor, but the birth-pangs of a world violently struggling in its womb that week of September 21, 1958. On the small island of Quemoy, just off the coast of China, the old regime of Nationalist Chinese fought against the awakening Red Chinese giant. We were not without our own troubles in the U.S., for while our knowing children were hula-hooping their way to new world records, the high schools of Little Rock stood empty rather than admit a single black student.

A simple, yet practical way to structure the paper is to choose one or more famous people in the news, and present what they said and did as characteristic of the times. The following paragraphs are the

introduction and conclusion of a paper written in this way:

> My father and mother knew the names well. They had read for years of Joseph McCarthy, Douglas MacArthur and Harry Truman. But during the week of October 17, 1949, I was blissfully unaware of these names. I had just been born that Monday, and to me, my mother was more important than McCarthy, MacArthur or Truman.
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> . . . . . .
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> What happened to McCarthy? He was censored by the Senate and died in 1956. What happened to MacArthur? He left the army, wrote his memoirs and died in 1969. What happened to Truman? He left the White House, wrote his memoirs and died in 1970. What happened to me? I am a student at Wichita State University, and I am compiling my memoirs.

Selection of Material. Beyond the problem of structuring these essays lies the question of how to select, combine and present the material so as to emphasize the theme. To put it a little more grandly, the students need ways of suggesting the historical significance of the time of their birth -- an idea that may require some explaining. For some people, history suggests a string of momentous crises; others may imagine it simply as a record of everything that happened -- "all the facts." Consequently, it is worth spending some time to demonstrate that the significance of one's birth date has to be created by the writer. "Significance" arises from the coherence of the events as the historian renders them, the continuity of the events described, the explanation of cause and effect relationships between events, and finally the way in which those past events foreshadowed, or prepared for what would happen later on:

1) Once he has established the theme and laid out the structure

of his essay, the writer must shape his narrative so that it presents a coherent picture, or more accurately, series of pictures. He also needs to show that the several different aspects of each situation are related, because they express a main trend or tendency of the period. A coherent idea of a national problem, for instance, can be built up by showing that the same kinds of events occurred in separate areas of the country about the same time. One student used this simple device to create a brief sketch of the racial conflicts of the late fifties:

> On the home front things were just as tense. In 1958 racial discrimination was rampant throughout the south, just as it had been 100 years before -- "In Memphis... six negroes who wandered into a public zoo were chased out because it was not their designated day to see the animals."[6] Under the threat of forced integration the Little Rock school board asked the Supreme Court to "indicate a path away from the bedlam, turmoil and chaos" that was sure to result. They asked for either a two and one half year delay of integration or a solution to "the threat of renewed violence."[7] The situation was equally as bad in Virginia where a federal judge accused politicians of inciting hostility to the integration of Virginia's public schools.[8] Although the Supreme Court unanimously rejected the appeals for the delay of integration, the governors of Virginia and Arkansas defied the Court and continued their opposition of racial integration.

In contrast, if the student is unaware or neglectful of this convention we call coherence, he may bring together several episodes which are superficially connected to a main situation, but have no essential

relationship to one another. The following paragraph by another student shows how such apparent relationships can lack any real coherence:

> President Eisenhower was in the news spotlight all week. He began his week in New York City, commemorating Columbus Day by laying a wreath in Columbus Circle. He also attended a corner-stone-laying at the Interchurch Center for the Protestant and Orthodox denominations. President Eisenhower returned to Washington, D.C., leading the list of diplomats that paid final tribute to Pope Pius XII, who was buried earlier in the week in Rome. "Ike" spent the last part of his week celebrating his sixty-eighth birthday. He visited his boyhood home and toured the Eisenhower in Abilene, Kansas.

2) Continuity is another main criterion for writing these short histories. To begin with, the narrative has to be placed in the context of its times. A brief phrase like "during the last part of the Korean war" is easy enough to slip into the introductory paragraph, and it draws little attention to itself. Leave out that kind of orienting phrase, however, and nothing in the paper sounds quite right.

Of course the principle of continuity applies to more than just lead paragraphs and paragraph markers. Within the individual sections of the paper, the reader needs to retain his sense of the order of events. Here, instead of framing the incidents, the writer tries to show how they fit into a larger pattern, or process. One way to suggest this continuity is to use a storyteller's technique and supply some narrative links, as this student did in describing the course of the day when she was born:

> Although my day began at about 9:55 a.m. most people had begun their Friday hours before. Businessmen had fastidiously

> combed their hair with Top Brass moisturizing hair dressing -- the wet head was certainly not dead.[3] Children were just starting a new school term, and they were eager to show old friends the new tricks they had learned on their $1.95 hula hoops.[4] In Little Rock, black high school students were wondering if they would even be allowed to learn at all.[5] Housewives were off on shopping excursions to buy the latest fashion in dresses -- empire waistlines, shaggy fabrics, and shorter hemlines.[6] NASA officials were biting their nails, trying to explain why the first U.S. satellite to orbit the moon exploded after seventy-seven seconds of flight.[7] And everyone -- across the nation, across the world -- was worried about waking up to a third world war.[8]

3) In these brief histories it is hardly possible for the writers to speculate at length about the causes of the events or attitudes they are describing. Nevertheless, with a phrase or two hinting at the reasons things happened as they did, they can add considerable depth to their short essays. Here is one example: "With the Russian launching of Sputnik, scientific studies became more important in the schools. This could be seen in the article featured in the May 10 issue of the Saturday Evening Post, 'Should Your Child Be a Scientist?'" Even this passing reference to Sputnik is enough to suggest how minor events in American education had their roots in a national preoccupation with the cold war.

4) Finally, the writers of these histories should give some thought to the consequences of the events they have selected. An event may be significant not only because it is related to a main trend (coherence) or to other current events (continuity) or to prior events, but also because it foreshadows important events which were to take

place in the future. As with the discussion of causes, a little said will go a long way. But observations about the predictive nature of events are valuable because they demonstrate the links between the events of the past and our own lives in the present -- one of the basic reasons for writing any history. Here is a concluding paragraph which indicates what are, in one student's opinion, some current trends that have been carried over from the fifties:

> It seemed, despite all the turmoil, that nothing was actually accomplished that week. Events kept spinning around like those innumerable hula-hoops, and like them too, never got anywhere. At the end of the week, Little Rock's schools were still closed, and would not open for another year. The trouble in Quemoy dragged on without solution, and lingers today, the future of Taiwan unresolved. Only our fads changed. Or did they? Those hoops are back, Elvis is fatter, but has retained his popularity, and the same familiar shows are re-run on T.V. Only I am different today, 18 years since my birth that week in September.

Format and Mechanical Details. The results of this freshman research -- the manuscript turned in for credit -- can take several forms. If the teacher wants the paper to be a library project or research exercise, it need only be an informal essay of three or four pages, like the ones which supplied these quotations. For more advanced students, or for research assignments that require a more sophisticated investigation of the week the student was born, the papers can be longer, drawing upon a greater variety of sources. Whatever the case, each paper should be accompanied by separate notes and bibliography that conform to a style manual selected by the teacher.

The nice thing about holding these papers to a set length and format is that it opens up the possibility of publishing an anthology: the class can combine their essays to make a short book with title page, table of contents, index, and the essays themselves, each followed by its own notes and bibliography. This can be an amusing project, and it has the added benefit of allowing each student to complete one of the basic tasks necessary to assembling the book. For example, one or more people can be assigned to: 1) Binding, design of cover, title page; 2) Table of contents, numbering of pages; 3) Editing and proof-reading; 4) Index; 5) Printing (typing, duplicating, mimeographing, etc.); 6) Illustrating. Other divisions are possible. The point is that by designing a book of essays, the students form a better idea of what a book is, just as by writing "freshman histories," they begin to develop a historical sense -- an awareness of how history is written, and how our own times may be seen within the context of history.

NOTES

[1]My colleagues Nancy Burns and Roy Campbell both worked on this assignment and developed some of the materials we now use in teaching it.